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Moscow May Be Ready To Deal on Arms Control

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THE idea that economic problems will impel Moscow toward making important compromises in the Geneva arms talks persists in the arms control debate. President Reagan himself gave support to this view when he said he was "optimistic that we're going to make more progress than probably has been made in a number of years because of some of the problems that are concerning the General Secretary at this time."

That was not the only time that Mr. Reagan expressed this view of the predicament of Mikhail S. Gorbachev, the Soviet leader. Referring to the Soviet Union's economic problems in a speech in December, Mr. Reagan said, "We hope that with that as a help that maybe we can begin a reduction." Mr. Reagan's remarks seem particularly relevant now, when there appear to be opportunities for negotiating on arms issues. A high-level

meeting with Soviet arms control officials is scheduled for Sept. 5 and 6 in Washington.

In addition, arms talks are scheduled to resume in Geneva on Sept. 18. Separate talks on verification measures for nuclear testing and the establishment of "risk reduction centers" — where the two sides could exchange reassuring data on exercises involving their strategic forces — are also scheduled to resume soon. In these meetings, the two sides seem to be seeking areas leading to agreements, however modest, that could be made formal at a Reagan-Gorbachev meeting in Washington before January. Last week, they continued to disagree on the Soviet moratorium on nuclear testing, which Mr. Gorbachev extended to Jan. 1. The United States has refused to join the moratorium.

In discussing how pliable the Russians might be on arms control, however, some Administration experts and former Pentagon officials caution against making too much of the Soviet Union's economic problems. They say that such problems by themselves are not likely to induce

the Soviet Union to "pay a high price" for an agreement — that is, make major concessions — although they are not saying that the Soviet Union would not derive economic benefits from a major arms agreement. The Soviet Union, they note, has demonstrated a remarkable commitment to military expenditures. According to a report in March by the Central Intelligence Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Soviet Union's military burden in the early 1980's was about 15 to 17 percent of the gross national product, a slight increase since the early 1970's. In contrast, the United States devotes about 6 percent of its much larger economy to the military.

The report also noted that "Gorbachev can coast for a few years on the strength of the U.S.S.R.'s past investment in its military-industrial complex."

Ready to Spend

Some former officials agree that too much should not be made of Soviet economic problems. One of them is Walter B. Slocombe, a ranking Defense Department official in the Carter Administration, the former head of the Pentagon's SALT task force, and now a Washington tax lawyer. "Sure the Soviets have economic problems and they are very severe," he said last week. "But one of the things they have always made space for is whatever they think they need to spend on military forces. They have always managed to pay. It is irresponsibly naive to suggest that we have got some kind of advantage in throwing money at the defense problem."

Another reason for not making too much of the Soviet Union's economic problems is that the fact that spending on nuclear weapons makes up a relatively small portion of each side's military budget. Mr. Slocombe and other former officials also say that economic considerations also have little bearing on the dispute between the United States and the Soviet Union over the 1979 strategic arms treaty. The Reagan Administration has announced its intention to abandon the treaty, which it accuses the Soviet Union of violating. Mr. Slocombe and the former C.I.A. Director, William E. Colby, have said that to show its displeasure, the Soviet Union could take several steps that would cost little but would be of concern to the American intelligence community. Such steps, which are prohibited by the treaty, could include covering missile silos, concealing launchers for mobile missiles, completely encoding Soviet missile telemetry and adding additional warheads to existing missiles.

Early in the Reagan Presidency, the Administration flirted with the idea that the United States could take advantage of the Soviet economic difficulties and use economic sanctions to encourage domestic changes. In a June 1982 address to the British Parliament, Mr. Reagan went so far as to say that the Soviet Union had an "inherently unstable" system that was currently undergoing a "great revolutionary crisis."

But the Administration later conducted a study that culminated in National Security Decision Directive 75. That directive, officials say, concluded that internal Soviet policy would have only limited influence on external policy. Next month's arms negotiations may provide a test of Mr. Reagan's more recent theory that economic burdens may lead to Soviet arms concessions.